TEACHING ABOUT ASIA

Teaching Modern Southeast Asia

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Teaching about Southeast Asia to undergraduates at an American liberal arts college presents several challenges. At my institution, it is the only course on the region in the curriculum; thus no preparation, and no follow-up. I have therefore struggled with the approach that I should take–pulled between a wish for students to gain an empirical understanding of Southeast Asian life, and a desire to have them learn the concepts and theories of critical inquiry. Obviously I am still learning how to successfully accomplish such an ambitious undertaking.

The course that I have taught the past few years is called Modern Southeast Asia. I use a set of readings that combines theories about modernity with literary and academic works written about Southeast Asia over the past century. The course's exploration of modern Southeast Asia is thematic rather than geographic: I divide the syllabus into readings on colonialism, anti-colonial revolution, post-colonial nationalism, and neo-liberal globalization. I like this approach for several reasons. First, many St. Olaf students study abroad, and I frequently hear the comment that the Asia they find is "Westernized." Returning students struggle to understand their encounters with the bustling traffic of Bangkok, the tourists crowding hill tribe villages, and the monumentalized reminders of military struggle in Vietnam. By describing such things with a geographical term like "Westernization," students assume that all change is exogenous to the region. Hence the emphasis on Southeast Asia's modernity shows the way that these signs of change have been indigenous to the region for a long time. Secondly, rather than have students focus solely on how Southeast Asia is different from North

America, Japan, and Europe, they are pushed to think about how the region is connected to those places.

Colonialism

Obviously such a course focuses deeply on the experience of colonialism. At our institution, colonialism tends to fall through the cracks of the curriculum. It is not quite Asian or African, and yet it is not quite European. Therefore students tend to be amazed at how much colonialism has structured the modern world. Numerous readings help to make this case, but none more effectively than George Orwell's short story, "Shooting An Elephant" (based on his experience as a police officer in British Burma). Not only did colonialism shape the parameters of contemporary Southeast Asia, Orwell argues, it also shaped the parameters of contemporary North America and Europe as well. Orwell writes that the colonizer "wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it" (Orwell, 1931:6). Indeed in Frantz Fanon's powerful phrase, "Europe is literally the creation of the Third World" (Fanon, 1961:102). Such claims show how Southeast Asians have been active agents in building the modern world, in locales near and far, and not just passive recipients of outside influences.

The work of Ann Stoler (2002) and Jean Taylor (1983) on the Dutch East Indies help to flesh out these ideas for students. They detail the subtle and not so subtle relationships of power developed in colonial conditions. But they also give students the complicated message that there was nothing inevitable about colonial divisions. Europeans could be gently absorbed, under the right circumstances, into Southeast Asian societies (Anderson, 1991:189). The ethnic and regional affiliation of my two best friends in Malaysia, brothers named Santa Maria (who consider themselves pure-blood Eurasians!), emphasizes the porous possibilities between East and West that effectively belie Kipling's dreams of eternal separation. It took a long time, and a lot of political and intellectual work, for Europeans to become White, and Southeast Asians to become Natives.

The development of the color bar and modern racial thinking in Southeast Asia thus appears to students as a strikingly odd

phenomenon. I use a collection of colonial memoirs to help them see the perversity of European colonial life in Southeast Asia (Saunders, 1998). Perhaps my favorite issue to highlight in the course is the excruciating boredom that most Europeans felt in their compulsion to live in Asia as White people. If boredom is a peculiarly modern emotion, it seems to appear as an antidote to feelings of risk and vulnerability. The more Europeans separated themselves from Southeast Asians, the more bored they felt. The vicious racism of late-colonial life thus becomes more understandable as a product of an anxious ennui. Louis Couperus, an artful chronicler of Dutch colonial life, shows in his novel *The Hidden Force* the creation of a modernity where people did not fit in anywhere. His family moved from Java to Holland when Couperus was 14 years old, but they remained socially apart from greater Dutch society. Couperus says that when he first returned to The Hague he "thought that Holland was terrible," and even in his later years he felt "like a tourist, like a foreigner who speaks Dutch remarkably well" (Couperus, 1985:5). Students reading *The Hidden Force* see that the more natural the modern categories appeared, the more awkward people felt inhabiting them.

Southeast Asian Experience of Modernity

Learning all of these aspects of colonialism are preparation for reading Indonesian author Pramoedya Anata Toer's magnificent novel, *This Earth of Mankind*. I have not found a better text to help students think about the Southeast Asian experience of modernity. The protagonist, Minke, has to come to terms with the maelstrom of change in which he finds himself amidst. At the opening of the book he exclaims,

> Modern! How quickly that word had surged forward and multiplied itself like bacteria throughout the world. (At least, that is what people were saying.) So allow me also to use this word, though I still don't fully understand its meaning (Pramoedya, 1980:18).

The passage is particularly lovely because it is a sentiment shared by my students, who often struggle to get their tongues around a fancy term like "modernity." In class I like to play Southeast Asian pop music, and reflect on recorded music as both an artistic mode and a medium of popular expression in ways familiar and unfamiliar to my students. After all, the insistent beat of pop music is the aural backdrop for contemporary Southeast Asian societies in motorized motion. Indeed, Minke notes that the powerful old Javanese verse forms do not work for him because "[T]he rhythm of my life writhes so wildly it could never be forced into the poetry of my ancestors" (Pramoedya, 1980:297).

A novel, of course, is an apt vehicle for discussing the forms of modernity. Benedict Anderson writes of modernity in Java as the creation of a new space for fantasy and the opportunity to experience new kinds of possible selves, even to conceive of one's self as an individual (1990). The novel as a modern genre itself reflects Pramoedya's own creative possibilities for imagination and expression. Pramoedya describes Minke as a keen observer, whose observations include awareness of the analytic eye of others. Toward the end of the book Minke notes uncomfortably, "Mama was being analyzed as if she were a character in a novel and Magda Peters was elucidating her personality in front of class" (Pramoedya, 1980:232). If colonialism worked through a set of related modalities, including surveillance, surveying, and counting, Minke vividly feels the objectification of culture characteristic of modern life. Understanding one's society through estrangement thus uncannily mimics our experience of studying the characters in his novel, and of studying Southeast Asia from a conceptual and geographical distance.

Such an estrangement and process of objectification comes through most clearly in reading a translated version of Pramoedya's original Indonesian. In *This Earth of Mankind*, Pramoedya depicts a confusing, dynamic modern relationship to language. Many of my more monolingual students find it entirely possible to conceive the world in terms isomorphic with

English. The struggle over language described in *This Earth of Mankind* thus open up a bigger understanding of how most of the world experiences the polyglot slipperiness of translation. The social life of languages—in hierarchy, in exclusion, and especially in connection–becomes much more apparent. The novel's characters constantly have to struggle with which language they wish to use and which language they can use. In one passage Minke notes that in talking with his friend Jean Marais, "He didn't know Dutch. That was the difficulty. His Malay was limited. My French was hopeless … but he was my oldest friend, my companion in business" (Pramoedya, 1980:55). Students encounter a multilingual Southeast Asia and begin to glimpse the implications of such an experience. My bilingual students, for whom this is nothing new, gain a sense of how language works as an index of power, and how their complicated experience of language is not the exception but rather the modern rule. Translation offers a wonderful mode for understanding contemporary Southeast Asia.

Students always wonder why Suharto's New Order government (which ruled Indonesia from 1966-1998) would ban *This Earth of Mankind*. The history of Pramoedya's cantankerous persona, his views about the nationalist contributions of Indonesians of Chinese descent, and the legacies of Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) are a challenge to narrate. But there does seem to be a communicable point about the profound threat in Pramoedya's take on translation and identity. Through his wonderfully enacted characters, Pramoedya brilliantly challenges the colonial and post-colonial state's obsession with racial division. Nyai Ontosoroh, Annelies, Jean Marais, and Minke himself replace identity concerns with a focus on affiliation. If identity answers the questions, "who are you?" affiliation instead asks, "whom do you want to become?" In a key passage, Minke sighs that

> what I was feeling then, such very depressed feelings, my ancestors called *nelangsa*—feeling completely alone, still living among one's fellows but no longer the

> same; the heat of the sun is borne by all, but the heat in one's heart is borne alone. The only way to obtain relief was communion with the hearts of those of a similar fate, similar values, similar ties, with the same burdens: Nyai Ontosoroh, Annelies, Jean Marais, Darsam (Pramoedya, 1980:289).

These diverse misfits unite together in a common political project. Perhaps Pramoedya's left-wing internationalism seems to be of another time, given our many contemporary misgivings about globalization. Nevertheless a key implication of *This Earth of Mankind* is that "Indonesian" is not a category for the exclusive management of the state, or the fixed product of an eternal essence. Nationalism in Pramoedya's eyes is a representation of desire to exceed boundaries rather than police them. Students are left to ponder how a man exiled to a prison camp could hold on to such a fantasy, and how it might connect to what they want to become.

War and Resistance

The rest of the course uses the lessons from Pramoedya to think about more recent developments in Southeast Asia. We read about the Japanese occupation, through texts by Benedict Anderson and Goto Kenichi (Anderson 1966, Goto 2003). These works show how Southeast Asians struggled to interpret the interests and possibilities created by a new set of colonial rulers. Did the occupation promise eventual liberation, or merely a new form of exploitation? Such works also reveal the revolutionary energy created by world war. Nothing quite shows the newly mobilized populations like newsreel footage of Indonesians marching in Japanese-sponsored militias. Such images foreshadow the newly militant societies that the Dutch, British, French, and Americans would find when they returned to Southeast Asia after the war's apparent end.

Amid the ferment of Southeast Asia's war-time mobilization, the best path to achieve independence was still not clear to nationalist leaders. David Marr's article on Vietnam in 1945

reveals the search for the revolutionary moment presented by the Pacific War, building off the years of strategizing done by Southeast Asians circulating through Tokyo, Paris, and Moscow (Marr 1980, Duiker 1981). Aung San Suu Kyi's reminiscences about her father and the father of Burma's independence, Aung San, depict the conflicting options he and his comrades faced (Suu Kyi, 1991). She details the debates between those who leaned toward the Japanese and those who worked with the Allies, along with the ethnic and ideological tensions inside Burma's diverse colonial borders. David Chandler's profile of Cambodia's Pol Pot makes students aware that extraordinary wartime circumstances created openings for future disaster along with independence (Chandler, 1992). The syllabus prepares students for such developments by reading Vicente Rafael's analysis of late nineteenth-century nationalism in the Philippines, the movement that predates the other nationalist movements in the region. Rafael notes how the Rizal and his fellow Illustrados created a sense of Filipino nationalism haunted by the ghosts of its creation (Rafael, 1995). The identity issues, questions about language, and modern confusions depicted by Pramoedaya remained specters throughout the twentieth century's unfolding of Southeast Asian nationalism.

Perhaps most complicated for students to understand is the Vietnamese revolution. Along with more conventional sources (Gilbert, 2002), I help students glimpse Vietnam's experience through a series of short stories by Le Minh Khue (1997). In her story "The Distant Stars," (originally published in 1971) three young women defuse bombs along the Ho Chi Minh trail by day and discuss their plans for the future by night. They imagine careers as doctors, engineers, or architects, with plenty of time for volleyball. The narrator says, "We would say to each other, 'from now until we're old, we'll have romance but we'll never marry. Marriage would mean too much work. Diapers. Blankets. Mosquito nets. Sawdust. Fish sauce'" (Khue, 1997:5). If, in David Marr's analysis, French colonialism put Vietnamese tradition on trial (1981), the teenagers find the revolution to be a heady space for imagining divergent possible

selves as a resolution to that trial. In contrast, one of her post-war stories, "The River," (originally published in 1986) shows the melancholy reality of urban bureaucratic life. The protagonist's nostalgia for rural life becomes manifested in snippets of French songs and creaking machinery. Both stories show an insistent longing for a sense of home, whether in the future or in the past. Their concerns are Pramoedaya's: Who are we? Whom do we want to become?

Two readings about memory show students the challenges of narrating the violence and division of Southeast Asia's modern history. Christina Schwenkel examines how Vietnam's old battlefields have been reconfigured as tourist attractions (2006). As such, the stories of heroic resistance to Western imperialists strain against the need to attract Westerners and their money. Schwenkel also analyzes the divergent generational understandings that younger Vietnamese have for the struggles that preceded their birth. Thongchai Winichakul's haunting, halting narrative of the 1976 massacre of students at Thammasat University in Bangkok shows how hard it is for anyone in Thailand to remember those painful events (2002). Since the massacre implicated the bedrock institutions of the country – the military, Buddhism, and the monarchy – it was easier to forget the violence than address the scope of the tragedy. Furthermore, as Thailand becomes middle-class, the attractions of the stock market and real estate block memories of past struggle and sacrifice. Such shifts produce a profound ambivalence about the traumas that preceded (and brought about) Thailand's consumer society.

Global Capitalism and Southeast Asia

The last part of the course thus examines the transformative power of capitalism in Southeast Asia. In some ways this would appear to be the most familiar to students in North America who themselves live amidst a society of advertising, markets for everything, and electronic communication. Yet by reading Ara Wilson's ethnography of Thailand's post-war merchant class, they see familiar things made strange (2004). Her analysis

of "intimate economies" shows how developments like the growth of shopping malls, the commodification of sex, and the popularity of direct marketing have reconfigured domestic life in Bangkok. The revolutionary power of the market borrows on old understandings, like the social obligations of kin and community, and puts them to new uses, as in selling Avon. Indeed Kasian Tejapira's work on "the postmodernization of Thainess" shows how the market turns national forms of affiliation into new forms of anxiety (2002). As he sees it, the shift to a society of consumers in Thailand makes "Thai" the object of commodification. "Thainess" becomes a floating sign of the marketplace, radiating out through advertising. Kasian speaks of a world of "identity commodities," with the consumption of consumer products "not for their intrinsic use value or socio-economic exchange value, but for their cultural value as signs of desired identity" (Kasian, 2002:208). His wonderful essay about what we might otherwise call globalization connects to a long history of cosmopolitanism in the region, and the wide range of connections between Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Globalization is hardly something new in a region where people, products, ideas, religions, and languages have been exchanged for a long time. As Pramoedya writes in the epigraph to *This Earth of Mankind*, "this narrow path has been trod many a time already …"

A World of Homogeneity or at Difference

Given this focus, what gets lost in translation in such a course? Well, as A.L. Becker reminds us, many things. Everything. Modernity can seem like a unitary, homogenizing force, steamrolling over Southeast Asian societies. It is a challenge not to flatten the variability of Southeast Asian society in the limited space of a single semester, especially for an anthropologist charged by the College's curriculum to teach students about cultural difference. Indeed, a sustained focus on modernity makes it harder for students to see in a sustained way what is different about Southeast Asian life. So students looking for an encounter with radical difference can leave the

course disappointed. Becker shows in his lovely essay about silence across languages (1992) the many things that are communicated silently because of their familiarity. When I teach about Southeast Asia during January afternoons in rural Minnesota, I hear a lot of silences. As Becker also points out, our experience is based on prior texts. I aim for students to explore Modern Southeast Asia so that they may make better sense of their own modern lives, and gain a new register for hearing the experience of other modern encounters and points of reference.

When I teach the course, I think of the teachers who years ago helped translate Southeast Asia for me. Professor Becker made me wonderfully aware of what happens when we translate from one cultural order to another. So too, Nancy Florida, whose knowledge of and critical appreciation for Javanese manuscripts shows where people of Pramoedya's age were writing from and writing against (1995). She pointed out to me, through months of careful reading of Pramoedya's work in Indonesian, endless points that I missed. I attempt to do the same for my students, in trying to highlight the absences and limits of our ways of seeing and mode of hearing. Since anthropology is itself a product of high modernism, questioning what it means to be modern and exploring alternate modernities is thus also a way to think about what escapes our senses and sensibility.

Our postmodern present, if it is indeed best labeled that, shapes the questions we bring to the past. During the Vietnam War, those days when the study of Southeast Asia in the United States was at its apogee, students brought considerable passion and energy to learning about the region. At the University of Michigan, where I once studied, senior faculty still remember courses in Southeast Asian Civilization enrolling 300-plus students. The questions about what Vietnamese peasants want or whether Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist or a communist no longer consume my students. To the degree that they have a relationship to Southeast Asia, it is through immigration and the large immigrant communities across the United States. Less obvious to students is their connection through commodities –

the innumerable products from Malaysia, Thailand, and elsewhere that flood American markets. Their Southeast Asia has email and the Web.

The stories that academics organize might help to locate this Southeast Asia. I highlight the concept of modernity, because it helps students to address why Singapore now has a higher per-capita income than Britain, or why the Hmong community has become so deeply integrated into American life so quickly. It helps students to question their attraction to the traditional, the rural, or the exotic, allowing them to better appreciate and understand the cosmopolitan complexity of Bangkok or Hanoi or Manila. After all, what's more modern: Northfield, Minnesota, or Jakarta, Indonesia? Rather than highlighting cultural differences, it allows them to make historical connections between East and West, and think beyond easy binaries.

The modern specters in Southeast Asia leave students with a set of questions about contemporary politics in the region: Why is it so hard to articulate a concept of Malaysia? Is Thailand necessarily Thai? What place does global capitalism have in the post-colonial order? The dreams and exclusions of Pramoedya's novel, along with the other works that we read, highlight a peculiar national and regional path, and point to the ghosts that remain in class differences, ethnic problems, authoritarian rule, and the utopian dreams of revolutions, both political and industrial. Even studying about Southeast Asia in geographically distant North America, we can recognize familiar dilemmas.

Rudolf Mrazek, who always referred to himself to his students as the professor with an accent, believed in getting lost in translation. His writing about Indonesian nationalists and Dutch engineers alike shows a love for people caught in between. When Southeast Asia was rendered with clear boundaries, he always felt disappointed. A book came out a few years ago about the Indonesian nationalist leader Tan Malaka, and the English translations were very good. In Mrazek's mind, the translations were too good. The smooth flowing English meant that

> My American students will, thus, have another barrier less to climb, and this is bad in itself. Moreover, I strongly believe that something should have been tried—by way of translation or in notes at least—to let a non-Indonesian reader feel precisely how important, in that time and place, the interaction between Indonesian and Dutch languages had been. Throughout the late colonial period, and throughout the war and revolution, on their way to what they believed was modernity, progress, and freedom, Indonesian intellectuals never passed easily over Dutch words, Dutch idioms and grammar. Several generations of Indonesian public figures, and Tan Malaka most probably among them, have struggled to speak and write Indonesian in spite of thinking in Dutch. This awkwardness was an essential part of the texts they left; to a very large extent, this was their culture (Mrazek 1992:68).

Studying modern Southeast Asia proves to be an awkward experience. How confident can we be about similarities and differences, or about flattening or deepening? Edward Said once wrote, "cultures and civilizations are so interrelated and interdependent as to beggar any unitary or simply delineated description of their individuality" (Said, 1994:347). As Southeast Asia and North America grow ever more together, and ever more apart, studying the history of these awkward modern relationships might become even more vital.

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